

# 'I AM A CAMERA'

## Julie Harris in a Play John van Druten Has Made From Isherwood's Stories

By **BROOKS ATKINSON**

SINCE John van Druten is a man of the theatre, and since Julie Harris is an extraordinarily gifted actress, "I Am a Camera" turns out to be an amusing play. On the basis of the material that is in it, a theatre-goer has a right to expect something more than amusement out of it for reasons that will appear later in this comment. Taken at face value, however, it is all theatre and it is droll, deft and witty. Reverting to the informal storytelling style of "I Remember Mama" Mr. van Druten has sketched some episodes in the irresponsible career of an English girl who is living by her wits in Berlin at the time when the Nazis are flexing their muscles.

If there were anyone less obvious to cast in the part of a Bohemian, egocentric trollop, it would be Miss Harris, who captivated the town with her restless, dreamy, innocent adolescent in "The Member of the Wedding" two years ago. But with a sure sense of theatrical originality, Mr. van Druten has now cast her as an impetuous and brilliant adventuress. She is magnificent. Now we all know, what we have always wanted to believe, that Miss Harris can play just about anything.

### Crackling Performance

The play crackles with electricity the moment she bounds in with a bustle of impertinent, self-conscious depravity. Although the part is a little nebulous in the Isherwood story from which Mr. van Druten took it, it is all lucidity and animation in Miss Harris' acting. There is not a hackneyed stroke in it.

Sally Bowles is the name of the character. Bored to death with her respectable life in England, Sally has come on impulse to Berlin in the hope of being a cinema actress. She has no particular talent. But she is quick-witted, superficially sophisticated, reckless, cunning and beautiful, and she sweeps through the demi-monde of Berlin like a runaway racehorse.

Miss Harris makes a vivid individual out of Sally. Her portrait is all on one plane of helter-skelter worldliness, with a number of minor variations denoting regret, appreciation and fear. The emotions are shallow and fugitive, but there is a terrific drive at the heart of Sally's character.

In some elusive way Miss Harris manages to act the part almost as if Sally were a disembodied spirit unrelated to the world, the theatre or Miss Harris. Even the drive and the tension are more like qualities of spirit than of personality—as if, in fact, Miss Harris had created the part out of her imagination and virtuosity as an actress and had completely detached it from herself. Since Sally is the chief character in "I Am a Camera," and since she is on stage most of the time, Miss Harris keeps the play vibrant, fresh and amusing.

### Basis in Fiction

The play is based on Christopher Isherwood's "The Berlin Stories," especially the one entitled "Sally Bowles." Mr. Isherwood was living in Berlin in 1930 when the Nazi revolution was getting under way. He was observing, like a camera with the shutter open, but, like the camera again, he was not taking part. After developing and fixing the material for a number of years Mr. Isherwood wrote it in the form of fiction; the several parts of the story were published in book form in 1945. With a gen-

uine sense of deliberate objectivity, they record the mood of some aspects of Berlin life at the beginning of a period that eventually wrecked the world.

At least by implication, Mr. Isherwood made the point that at a monstrously critical moment in the world's history people were thoroughly immersed in their own pleasures, problems and affairs and unaware of the big forces all around them. In the play, Mr. van Druten has preserved that disinterested point of view. But he has put the emphasis on comedy more insistently than Mr. Isherwood did.

### Underplaying the Politics

It is a little like "My Sister Eileen" with some quick adumbrations of politics in the background. Reports of the first attacks on Jews pop in and out of the play like petty irritations that intrude for an instant or two on the Bohemianism of the two chief characters. But in the original book Mr. Isherwood developed the political overtones more thoroughly, particularly in the wistful character of Natalia's uncle, who does not appear in the play.

To report in 1951 that two English young people were not greatly disturbed in 1930 by the outbreak of Nazism in Berlin is a valid point and no doubt absolutely true. But it is impossible for the rest of us to be that detached now. And if a playwright sets his drama in Berlin in 1930 he is under an implied obligation to make dramatic use of time and place.

Being funny is not enough; the need is for irony. Although Mr. van Druten has skillfully recorded the comic insignificance of the lives of his chief characters, he has not dramatized it by giving their aimless existence much perspective. "I Am a Camera" dismisses you from the theatre with a feeling of incompleteness. Much that is crucial is left hanging in the air.

### Expert Theatre Work

Since the comedy is amusing, this critical comment may be counsel of perfection and beside the point. For the basic fact remains that Mr. van Druten is a remarkably able theatre man, both as writer and director; and he has had the taste to surround himself with people of talent. In designing the set of a Berlin rooming-house, Boris Aronson has not put some scenery together at random, but has modestly caught the heedlessness and the shabbiness of the life that goes on there, and perfectly set the mood for the play. Most of the acting is distinguished: in the irresolute and difficult part of the English boy, William Prince gives an admirable performance; and Marian Winters and Martin Brooks act the parts of two Berlin young people with perception and taste.

And Miss Harris is a wonder. Nothing else in this entertaining trifle is as brilliant and searching as her pithy acting; and this is reason enough for rejoicing.

### Drama Bookshelf

**THE THEATRE BOOK OF THE YEAR 1950-51.** By George Jean Nathan. 292 pages. New York: Knopf. \$4.

Reviews of all last season's plays by the pundit of The Royalton and bailiff of Broadway.

**SAINT JOAN. PYGMALION. CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA.** By Bernard Shaw. Baltimore, Md., 3300 Clipper Mill Road: Penguin Books, Inc. 25c each.

These paper-bound volumes include the prefaces.